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Getting the facts

**Leith Young**

April 19, 2010



### **Is it OK for people to drink before they are 18?**

Plenty of teenagers drink alcohol. It's seen as relaxing and fun. It's a way to open up. Friends drink too and parents often supply the alcohol.

Some start very young, even at 12 years old. According to the Australian Drug Foundation, 96 per cent of kids under 17 have tried alcohol, with 21 per cent drinking weekly.

A major report for the Australian National Council on Drugs says in any given week, about one in 10 (or 168,000 people) 12 to 17-year-olds are binge drinking at harmful levels. Boys had seven or more drinks on the day and girls had five or more.

Many parents have given children wine, beer or spirits. One idea was that if they first drank with the family, teenagers would learn to handle alcohol in a responsible way. They would be less inclined to lash out and get drunk the minute they turned 18 and could appreciate that food and wine complement each other at the dining table.

Now, health advisers believe that it's definitely NOT all right to drink before 18. Not even sips from a parent's glass.

Why? Newly emerging medical evidence shows it dumbs down the brain. Alcohol actually stops young brains developing normally. This is not just a temporary effect like loss of co-ordination, or doing impulsive and risky things after you've been drinking - such as swimming at night or balancing on a balcony railing.

Professor Ian Hickie from the Brain and Mind Research Institute at the University of Sydney says alcohol affects the brains of teenagers differently from the way it affects adults. The structures in adolescent brain, particularly the frontal and temporal lobes, are in their "fine tuning", maturing phase. The changes are rapid, go on until at least the early 20s and make the brain super sensitive to any trauma, including toxic effects of alcohol.

New medical imaging and animal and human studies are showing that excessive alcohol in teenagers kills or damages brain cells, damages the connections between brain cells and harms the normal regeneration of brain cells. The rapidly maturing frontal and temporal lobes are especially

vulnerable. Memory and ability to learn may be damaged.

Lots of nasty things do happen when people drink too much (fights, falls, vomiting, passing out, drowning, unwanted sex). Alcohol accounts for 13 per cent of all deaths among 14 to 17-year-old Australians.

Now research is also showing an increased risk of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression later on in life.

### **They say**

"We basically need some state premiers to show a bit of guts. You'd think if they had teenagers themselves it would be at the top of their list of health reforms. We need to raise the legal drinking age; even one year older would make a difference. And there is no reason for anyone to be able to drink all night!"

**Professor Ian Hickie, Brain and Mind Research Institute, University of Sydney**

"Alcohol causes serious developmental problems. The younger you start drinking and the more you drink, the more likely you are to have health problems throughout your life."

**Todd Harper, CEO, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth)**

"Some parents believe that providing alcohol with a meal in a family setting is appropriate because that is the way they were brought up. Unfortunately, there is no strong evidence to suggest that providing alcohol to your child in the home teaches them to drink responsibly."

**DrinkWise Australia campaign**

### **You say**

"A lot of people drink at parties. I can't see much wrong with it, nothing really bad has happened to anyone I know. Some people get drunk but they get over it."

**Alvis, 17**

"Forbidding something only makes it more enticing and encourages abuse when finally you are legally allowed it. If your parents let you drink before 18, you don't need to sneak it and act immaturely - you feel a sense of responsibility to drink sensibly."

**Sarah, 17**

### **What's your view?**

- Is it OK for young people to drink before they are 18?
- Should the legal drinking age be increased?
- What can be done to encourage responsible drinking?

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Re: Getting the facts

why is every so up tight when it comes to the legal drinking age. either way the government isnt

going to win!! if they increase the legal age underage people will still drink. we (people underage 18) see it as an easy way to have fun and it makes us feel more relaxed, even comfortable, which may be uncomfortable if sober! if they keep the legal drinking age at 18 nothing is going to change. underage people are going to absolutely smashed (drunk) and may even die due to risky behaviour. The age limit isn't going to change for a long time to come or until WE pull our act together and start being responsible. People who start drinking in year 7, 8 or even 9, GET A LIFE!! your life can't be that bad that drinking is your only way to have fun!!

Jess, 2 September 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

Re: Getting the facts

I think the issue being missed in the article is WHY teenagers drink.

This is the issue that needs to be addressed.

Many teenagers drink because they find it a release from social pressures such as schooling, relationships and family. While other teenagers drink because it is apart of the social culture they have grown up in and because of the over sexualisation of alcohol in the media.

Im a teenager and drink because of a combination of these. Teenagers also drinking because getting smashed each weekend is there way of crying for help as they are unable to actually do so.

Not all teenagers drink just because they can, infact very few do

Matthew, 27 May 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

Re: Getting the facts

I am a teenager of 16 years and never once have I been intoxicated. Often, hearing my friends talking about 'how fun it was being drunk' I feel pressured to drink but I always keep thoughts in my head about how alcohol damages the brain and when exams are coming up, I don't want to risk it!

I personally think that the drinking age should be raised to 21. Why isn't the Government doing more to stop not just binge drinking but underage drinking altogether? I often wonder how my friends can live with themselves knowing they probably damaged some of their brain and there is little chance of getting it back.

Drinking, especially binge drinking is actually quite disgusting. No one (or very few) wants to see someone lose their perception of what is around them and then cause themselves to act in a strange way... or do they?

These days it seems 'not drinking' particularly underage is uncool. Although I do feel somewhat isolated in my thoughts, I will never let myself stoop that low.

Melissa, 4 May 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

Re: Getting the facts

The government should increase the age for legal drinking, just to try and reduce the number of drinkers and to save the future of australia from being totally underdeveloped and unable to retain any information. Although, with so many underage drinkers already disobeying the law, it is uncertain whether the change in law will make a difference to the brain developement of australias teenagers.

If the government really want to get the message across they need to start advertising in target areas of adolescent technology, like tv and the long list of commonly used non- educational websites.

sasha, 28 April 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

Re: Getting the facts

drinking isnt that bad. just need to control yourself and act responsible.

kara, 20 April 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

Re: Getting the facts

I find it sad how people think that the only way to have a good time is to drink. I have had so many awesome nights and moments that I find are so much better without alcohol. I think I can speak for the 4% of teens who have never drunk, that making the choice not to drink is hard. I have had many occasions where it seemed like it would be so much easier if i did. But by making that choice now I find it makes other choices easier, like saying no to drugs or cigarettes. I am constantly bombarded with lectures and tutorials at school trying to educate us on the effects of smoking, drugs and alcohol. But I find it is the little choices that make a big difference.

Jordan, 19 April 2010, -

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Re: Getting the facts

The biggest issue with this whole discussion is that young people now think they cant have fun without the alcohol. This concept has come from adults through the media, parents and other role models. Until we change the thinking of adults as well as youth nothing will change. What is wrong with having fun without drinking? It is possible it just takes a readjustment in thinking.

Sally, 19 April 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

Re: Getting the facts

People who drink, thinking that if their parents just give it to them like that, doesn't mean they are going to drink responsibly. I know many people who take absolute advantage of the situation and take drinks right under their parent's noses. Drinking, as said in this article dumbs down the brain, and if continued at an adolescent age, the brain will pretty much fail, and you are going to be mentally disabled for the rest of your life, as it is very hard to recover.

Kyle, 19 April 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

Re: Getting the facts

I started binge drinking last year when i was in year nine and fourteen years old, and often i would drink twice in one weekend, every weekend during holidays.

At the start of this year I decided i would stop drinking entirely but i believe it is too late to prevent what has already taken place inside my brain. i do find it harder to learn, my concentration lasts for a short period of time and my memory is shocking. I have to try so much harder to remember things i would usually find easy.

I am hoping fervently that my past drinking phase will not effect me in my future life but I'm not so sure.

Sarah, 19 April 2010, -

[Reply to this](#)

## KEY DATES

**Sat, Dec 18 - Thu, Feb 3:** Term 4 school holidays

**Fri, Feb 4:** Term 1 begins

**[Sun, Mar 6 - Sun, Mar 27:](#)** Nation of Nations poster series with *The Sunday Age*

**Mon, Mar 14:** Labour Day

**Sat, Apr 9 - Tue, Apr 26:** Term 1 school holidays

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